

What's in a cast collection?

Susanne Turner

As we can see in the article on pages 18–20, the collection and arrangement of objects in museums tells us a lot about recent, as well as ancient, history. Here Susanne Turner discusses the cast of gods and heroes in the museum she curates.

The Museum of Classical Archaeology is a small museum nestled in the Faculty of Classics at the University of Cambridge. Our main attraction is a collection of more than 600 plaster casts of ancient Greek and Roman statues – come and visit us and you can view sculpture as it developed all the way from the giant Sounion kouros figure through to the purple resin cast of the so-called late antique tetrarch emperors, found today on the corner of St Mark's Basilica in Venice. We're justly proud to have the casts, since ours is one of very few cast collections to survive to the present day.

A cast is a direct copy of its original made by taking a mould from the statue – it therefore replicates the 'real thing' in size and detail, if not in material. Plaster is a deceptive fabric for a statue; you can make its surfaces look like both marble and bronze with the right lacquer (our casts were given a 'special treatment' in the 1960s and '70s to make them look more 'real'), but it remains brittle and more fragile than its original. Casts are even more vulnerable to touch than their originals; plaster is porous, and apt to absorb the oils on your hand like a sponge.

Fundamentally, then, plaster casts are just copies, and apparently substandard ones at that. Our casts are mere shadows of their former and original selves. They're not real. They're just, well, fake. Aren't they?

And if so, why does the University of Cambridge have a museum which is full of copies?

The answers to these questions are more complex (and more interesting!) than they might first appear, for no copy is ever just a copy – or, at least, that's what I want to show here. Every copy opens up a dialogue between the original object and its doppelgänger: a conversation which goes two ways, bouncing between replica and prototype and back again. No copy ever stands alone; how could it? We only

recognise it as a copy because we see in it something else. Or, to put it another way, every copy gains its meaning precisely because it's in a relationship with its original – even if that original is far away, or lost.

In the case of the Museum of Classical Archaeology, the dialogue or relationship is not only between the plaster casts and their ancient precursors, but is also between the modern space of the Cast Gallery today and the nineteenth-century(ish) origins of the cast collection. The casts aren't empty vessels for the appreciation of classical ideals; instead, they are tangled up in the history of the very practice of classical archaeology in the last two centuries, both in their history as a collection and in the way they are used and displayed today.

Objects with a history

Let's start at the beginning. That beginning starts in 1884, when Cambridge's Museum of Classical Archaeology was founded. The Fitzwilliam Museum had been slowly building a collection of casts since its own inception in 1848 – but now the collection had grown large enough that the casts needed a home of their own.

At this time, long before the invention of the internet and mass media, before photography was economic enough to become an everyday affair and when to travel to view the original statues was out of the reach of most, casts were an important means for new discoveries to be made widely known. This was certainly the case of the impressive new finds from Olympia, the home of the ancient Olympic Games. Excavations were on-going during the 1880s – and the Museum was taking delivery of casts, such as the Nike of Paionios, within just six months of the discovery of the original. The cast collection, then, was never just a dead collection of copies; it was an active engagement

with current archaeology. The casts brought Olympia – and up-to-date archaeology – home to Cambridge.

But the oldest casts in the collection were not, in fact, purchases on the part of either the Fitzwilliam or the Museum of Classical Archaeology but donations from private estates, usually on the death of the owner. Something like the Farnese Hercules (pictured on the previous page) – donated in the early 1850s, making it not only one of our largest casts at well over 3m tall but also one of our oldest – had a life in a private house long before he became part of a museum collection. A home is obviously a rather different context from a museum; the purchase of a (cast of a) Farnese Hercules must surely have made a strong statement not only about the size of a man's wealth (and, necessarily, his house), but also about his knowledge of the classical world. In this way, the earliest casts are as implicated in the history of collecting and the display of personal cultural capital – in this case, probably a classical education – as they are with the processes of the rediscovery of the antique.

Cast collecting, then, has a complex history – one which challenges the idea that these casts were ever 'just' copies to those who were buying them and viewing them in the nineteenth century, and which even resonates with the collection practices of ancient Romans, who themselves commissioned countless 'copies' of older Greek statues. Indeed, it seems unlikely that Victorian collectors had the same idea of 'authenticity' in their heads when they viewed a cast as we do today. Where we see a pretty huge chasm between the replica and the original, viewers in the nineteenth century saw a much smaller breach between the two. Casts offered an opportunity to own a part of antiquity – and, in a context where it was the done thing to restore broken sculptures to their former glory, nineteenth-century viewers were less concerned to spot the difference between ancient and modern.

Bits of a puzzle

We now think rather differently about copies and casts. And yet, there are some striking advantages to having a cast collection. Our casts preserve sculptures

now sadly destroyed, or details long lost on originals which have been exposed to environmental pressures. Some, like the Laocoön, preserve old reconstructions which have long since been replaced on the original; they remember, if you like, the past life of the sculpture in a previous incarnation. Some, like the Lyon Kore (a cast of a famous archaic sculpture) bring together two halves of a statue which are now split between two collections.

But our most well-loved and well-known exhibit is probably the finest example of the types of games we can play with a cast which we couldn't with an original. The Peplos Kore is a statue of a young woman which was discovered on the Athenian akropolis in 1884, the same year the Museum was founded. We have two casts of this sculpture, one of which is fragmented and plain and one of which is painted and restored to make her look like we *think* the original may have looked like. Her dress is bright red and blue and green, with extra decorative bands added for detail; she wears bronze earrings in her ears and an odd 'umbrella' to cover her head (protection from birds?), evidenced in the original only through a series of holes in the stone. The original, when it was found, carried preserved traces of paint – so we know she was originally painted, probably brightly, even though we can no longer see the colours for ourselves.

The painted Peplos Kore captures some of the exuberance now missing from the original. But at the same time, she also challenges a great many of our assumptions and received ideas about ancient sculpture. Let's be honest, how many of us mentally colour in the white marble of the Parthenon frieze or add cosmetic enhancements to the milky flesh of the Aphrodite of Knidos? And, more to the point, how many of us want to? Thanks to the fashions of neoclassicism, we're very comfortable and happy with bright white stone – and much less so with such apparently garish paintwork. Some visitors take a dislike to the painted Peplos Kore. But, by provoking a reaction, she's doing an important job – and one which her original could never do.

Telling a story

It should now be becoming clear that our plaster casts have their own stories to tell – stories about the history of collecting, stories about piecing together the past. But, of course, our casts also have a tale to tell about what we know about ancient sculpture, about its development and its context and its history. The Museum of Classical Archaeology has always been a teaching collection, and it remains so today. This educational element has important implications not only for the

way the collection is used but also for the way it is viewed. In short, the academic context has shaped the way the casts are displayed.

Walking through our Cast Gallery is like walking through time: the visitor who steps through the doors sees the earliest sculptures first, since the casts are laid out broadly chronologically. As you stroll through the gallery, you can literally see for yourself how classical sculpture changed over time – from the stiff and frontal figures of the archaic period, to the more 'naturalistic' and believable bodies of the classical period, into the excess and diversity of the Hellenistic period and, finally, the portraits of the Romans.

In many ways, this is a very traditional evolutionary narrative to emphasize about ancient art – it's a story about development and progression, about the rise of naturalism (and its fall, in the Hellenistic and Roman periods...). The story of how the Greeks learned to sculpt believable-looking bodies is a familiar one: the Cast Gallery is a little bit like a text book on Greek and Roman art come to three-dimensional life – which makes perfect sense, of course, since the casts have always been used as a teaching resource. Full-size statues are always a more effective teaching tool than small and flat pictures in a book.

Of course, it's also a narrative which is quite hard to play out – and lay out – in practice. Many Greek statues are only known through later Roman versions, 'free' copies which – unlike plaster casts – do not attempt to replicate identically the lost original. So where do you put a Roman 'copy' of a Classical Greek original (in a museum full of copies...)? Do you put it in the Roman period or the Classical...?

We make choices. Our Roman versions reside alongside their Greek counterparts. We have to foreground some of the stories we can tell about ancient art at the expense of others. The Cast Gallery presses its visitors to compare and contrast, to play their own game of putting together the puzzle of how ancient sculpture (and its history) should be reconstructed.

Most museum collections, as you will read elsewhere in this edition of *Omnibus*, are built through serendipity, through the accidents of discovery combined with the quirks of the art market. Ours was built through deliberate design, which is a rather different way of curating a collection – and which entails a rather different way of looking at and engaging with that collection, too. Cast collections have had a fractured history. Many were destroyed in the 1960s and '70s – devastated with hammers, pushed off buildings, left to rot in damp basements – when the (strange) hold of the classical on contemporary art loosened its grip. But our cast collection is not just special because it is rare,

but because it is a place where the ancient and the modern collide – and that makes casts (even the ones bought in more recent years) historical objects in their own right, well worth a second look. So why not pay us a visit?

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